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Mail Order the Modern Way

This is the first in a series of articles on marketing topics by CSREES' Small Farm Program staff.

Marketing is critical to the success of any small farm. Often, small farmers do better when they market directly to the consumer, rather than through middlemen.

Direct marketing through roadside stands, farmers markets, and "u-pick" operations work, but these traditional approaches all depend heavily on a good location for success. Mail order marketing does not share this limitation. If you advertise your products in a magazine or newspaper and mail the products to the buyer, your farm's location does not matter.

One modern version of mail order marketing that uses computers is Internet marketing. A web page or website where you offer your products for sale on the Internet is like an ad in a newspaper or magazine. However, your ad can run 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and there is no word limit. Further, your ad potentially reaches people all over the world.

"But wait," you say. "I know nothing about making web pages or running websites. I don't even own a computer. I don't even know how to use a computer!"

It doesn't matter. Being a whiz with computers is no more important to marketing on the Internet than knowing how to set print is to putting an ad in the paper. There are companies that will create and manage your website. Your customers do not need



Many small farmers and ranchers are using Internet marketing to offer their products to consumers.—USDA/ARS PHOTOGRAPH/SCOTT BAUER

to reach you via a computer. They can call, fax, or mail their orders to you.

Is INTERNET MARKETING FOR YOU?

You need to look at several factors to decide if Internet marketing could work for you.

Number of Potential Customers. The most important advantage of Internet marketing for most farmers is that you can reach a very large number of potential buyers—in fact, millions. Forrester Research estimates that U.S. online retail sales will generate \$52.2 billion in revenues by 2001. If you are looking for more customers and for sales growth in the future, Internet marketing may be a good alternative for you.

Flexible Hours. Another advantage, especially if you are a part-time farmer, is that you do not need to be physically present during established hours. Although Internet marketing can be more flexible in terms of when

you have to be present, you do need to respond to your customers promptly [em dash] by telephone, fax, or electronic mail, for example. Responding will take just as much time as it would with any traditional marketing approach.

Competition. A potential disadvantage is that you are competing with many other people for the customer's attention. In a farmer's market or roadside stand, only a few people sell the same product. On the Internet, you may be competing with dozens or even hundreds of people selling the same product. Figuring out how to get the buyer's attention therefore becomes critical.

Transportation. You need to have a fast, reliable, cost-effective way of getting the product to the customer. Many people do not want to wait long for a product, and lost orders will ruin repeat sales.

Cost becomes an issue because

CONTINUED ON PG. 6...

Farmers Markets On the Rise

The number of farmers markets in the United States has grown dramatically, according to new data released in November by USDA Secretary Dan Glickman. USDA's 1998 updated farmers market directory lists 2,746 farmers markets operating in the United States, up from 2,410 in 1996 and 1,755 in 1994, when USDA began collecting the data.

USDA's *National Directory of Farmers Markets* provides a summary of

market locations, contact persons, telephone and fax numbers, days and hours of operation, and participation in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children and in food gleaning and recovery programs.

The *Directory* can be accessed on the Internet (<http://www.ams.usda.gov/farmersmarkets>). To obtain a copy, contact Denny Johnson, Agricultural Marketing Service, USDA, Rm. 2642-S, 1400 Independence Ave., S.W., Washington, DC 20250-0267 (telephone: 202/720-8317; e-mail: denny_n_johnson@usda.gov). ■

1890s Prepare Agriculturalists of Tomorrow

The year 1999 will mark the 109th anniversary of passage of the Second Morrill Act of 1890, which created America's historically black land-grant colleges and universities, among others. The 1890 institutions prepare thousands of students each year for careers in areas such as agricultural engineering, animal genetics, food science, horticulture, nutrition, plant science, range management, soil and water science, and wildlife management.

One 1890 student with an eye on the future is **Lakethia Glenn**, a junior at Alcorn State University, in Lorman, Mississippi. An agriculture major specializing in horticulture, Glenn began college with the help of a scholarship from Alcorn.

Glenn is also gaining valuable on-the-job experience by working part-time with Alcorn's Cooperative Extension Program. Alcorn's Associate Extension Administrator Jesse Harness notes, "We are pleased to mentor promising students like Lakethia in agricultural



Photo by Deidre Smith

careers. Agriculture needs to attract more young people like her."

"I am grateful to mentors at various points in my life who have reached out to me and encouraged me to pursue a career in agriculture," Glenn says. "I hope someday to 'pass along' the kindness I have been shown by becoming an effective mentor myself."

USDA partners with 1890 historically black land-grant institutions through initiatives such as the USDA/1890 Scholars Program and the 1890 Institution Teaching and Research Capacity Building Grants Program as well as through the activities of 1890 Liaison Officers, the USDA/1890 Task Force, and other groups. For further information, contact Higher Education Programs, Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service, Rm. 3431 South Bldg., USDA, Washington, DC 20250-2251 (telephone: 202/720-8282; fax: 202/720-2030) or visit the office's website on the CSREES home page (<http://www.reeusda.gov>; select "Higher Education Programs"). ■

Small Farm Digest is published three times a year by the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service, United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Washington, DC 20250-2220.

The Secretary of Agriculture has determined that this periodical is necessary in the transaction of public business required by law.

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Readers wishing to contribute items to *Small Farm Digest* may send their submissions to Stephanie Olson, Editor, *Small Farm Digest*, CSREES, USDA, Mail Stop 2220, 1400 Independence Ave., S.W., Washington DC 20250-2220 (telephone: 202/401-6544; fax: 202/401-1602; e-mail: solson@reeusda.gov). Unless otherwise stated, information in this publication is public property and may be reprinted without permission.

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Subscriptions

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Small Farm Digest is printed with soy-based ink on paper containing a minimum of 50 percent waste paper. *Small Farm Digest* is recyclable.

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Your Small Farm Neighbors

Marketing on the Internet



Photo by Sue M. Rowley

Phil Rowley is a descendant of a Utah pioneer family that has raised fruit since the 1900's. Today, Phil markets fruit products from South Ridge Farms, his 350-acre operation in Santaquin, Utah, on the Internet.

"My great-great grandmother was among the pioneers who came West," Phil says. "A widow with seven children, she walked across the plains pulling a handcart and settled in Utah. Survival meant self-sufficiency, and farming became a way of life. My family planted some of the first sour cherry trees in the State."

"Now, three generations later," he laughs, "we are still planting fruit trees. We have turned these fruits into scrumptious jams, jellies, syrups, butters, and salsas. All our products are made by hand in small batches and simmered with care because we want our customers to remember life on the farm and the traditions of value that derive from farm life."

Phil's nephew, who is experienced with computers, first suggested that Phil consider marketing through the Internet. He helped Phil design the South Ridge Farms website (<http://www.southridgefarms.com>). This year, South Ridge Farms is linking its website to other fruit-related sites, such as that of the Cherry Marketing Institute (<http://www.cherrymkt.org/>).

Since advertising on the Internet, the Rowleys have noticed a tremendous increase in customer orders from as far away as Australia and Europe. "The important thing," says Phil, "is to get your site out there so

people can see it. We do a lot of advertising to help customers know how to find us. You may think that just by putting your business on a website, people will flock to you, but you have to find ways to help them find you."



Photo by Joyce N. Haase

Gary and Lynn Haase have raised blueberries on Blueberry Ridge Farm in Sherwood, Oregon, since 1983.

When they first began, the couple marketed the fruit through a "u-pick" operation. Then they branched out into frozen blueberries and jams and soon expanded to other specialty products, including jams, jellies, dried blueberries, canned whole blueberries, oat bran blueberry muffin mix, and blueberry buttermilk pancake and waffle mix.

The couple began marketing on the Internet in 1997 as producer members of the Oregon Gourmet Foods Trade Association. "An association can be an excellent way for a small business to start out because you get a support system," Gary says. "Some associations provide their members with help in designing product labels and Internet websites. All we did was provide our association webmaster with photographs and

descriptions of our products. The webmaster did the rest and got our website up and running in a short time."

The Haases were surprised by the response to their website. "We had 10,000 'hits' on our site (<http://www.blueberryridge.com>) in the first several months," Lynn says. "There were so many orders, our little farm could not meet the demand."

The Haases have found it necessary to pull their website off the Internet temporarily while they rethink the scale of their operation and devise ways to keep up with orders. "Now, we are purchasing blueberries from seven other farms in the area," Gary says. "We pick up their berries and pay the farmers on the spot. We preserve the fruit by drying or other methods so we can maintain sufficient inventory."

Since 1997, the Haases have upgraded their Internet marketing procedures. "At first, we took orders by telephone or by fax or e-mail, with an order form we provided on the website," Gary says. "Later, we set things up for credit card orders as well."

Phil, Lynn, and Gary agree that Internet marketing has worked well for them. For additional tips on Internet marketing, see the box below. ■

TIPS FOR INTERNET MARKETERS

Phil, Lynn, and Gary suggest the following:

- Update your website often with new product information.
- Create a special place within the site for information exchange (e.g., recipes keyed to products sold).
- Link your website to other sites that feature related items.
- Confirm the exact cost of the order as well as how and when the order will be shipped.
- Make sure the site is secure for credit card users.
- List both a toll-free and a regular telephone number for people who would prefer to call in their orders.
- Each time someone buys a product from you, record the purchasing information so you can build a customer database.

A wide range of resources are available to assist small farmers and ranchers and their communities. Readers wishing further information about the resources listed below are asked to contact the individuals or offices listed for each item.



PRINT MEDIA

Farm Direct Marketing Digest. The bimonthly newsletter of the Pacific Northwest Farm Direct Marketing Association, this publication features articles on direct marketing techniques, members, resources, and events. The annual association membership fee of \$30 includes a subscription to *Farm Direct Marketing Digest*, *The American Vegetable Grower Magazine*, and *Western Fruit Grower Magazine*. For further information, contact Farm Direct Marketing, Pacific Northwest Farm Direct Marketing Association, P.O. Box 4612, Pasco, WA 99302 (telephone: 509/547-5538; fax: 509/547-5563).

How To Find Agricultural Information on the Internet. This 100-page book by Mark Campidonico covers areas such as choosing an Internet provider, figuring costs, using electronic mail, getting answers from e-mail discussion groups, and searching the web. The cost is \$12 plus \$3 handling. To order, contact University of California ANR Communication Services, 6701 San Pablo Ave., Oakland, CA 94608-1239 (telephone: 1-800/994-8849; fax: 510/643-5470). Excerpts are available on the web (<http://www.sarep.ucdavis.edu>).

Metrofarm. Readers interested in farming for metropolitan market-

RESOURCES

places may be interested in *Metrofarm: The Guide to Growing for Big Profit on a Small Parcel of Land*, by Michael Olson. Defining metrofarm as "a small farm that is dedicated to serving a metropolitan marketplace," the 576-page book covers topics such as agribusiness, developing a metrofarm strategy, surveying the market, evaluating land, selecting crops, and organizing a business. The cost is \$29.95 (paper) plus \$5 shipping. For further information, contact TS Books, P.O. Box 1244, Santa Cruz, CA 95061-1244 (telephone: 1/800-624-BOOK; website: <http://www.metrofarm.com>).

Operating a Profitable Small Farm. A series of 21 factsheets on various aspects of small farming is available at no charge from the University of Maryland Cooperative Extension. The resources, developed by Terry Poole, cover areas such as basic soil and plant fertility, cover crops, enterprise development, and marketing.

The factsheets also are available on the web (<http://www.agrnr.umd.edu/users/frederick/pubs/>). To order, contact the Frederick County Office of University of Maryland Cooperative Extension, 330 Montevue Lane, Frederick, MD 21702 (telephone: 301/694-1594; fax: 301/694-1588).

Part-Time Farming, Small Farms, and Small-Scale Farming in the United States. A collection of recent references and citations on small farms,

this 38-page resource (QB97-03) is available free of charge. To order, contact Mary Gold, National Agricultural Library, USDA, Rm. 304, 10301 Baltimore Blvd., Beltsville, MD 20705-2351 (telephone: 301/504-6559; fax: 301/504-6409).

Resource Directory for Small Business Management. This directory lists publications and videotapes useful for starting and managing a successful small business. The cost is \$50. To order, contact the Consumer Information Center, Dept. 361F, Pueblo, CO 81009 (telephone: 1-888/878-3256; fax: 719/948-9724). The publication also is available on the Consumer Information Center website (<http://www.pueblo.gsa.gov>).

Rural Property Bulletin. This monthly publication features properties for sale, including farms, ranches, acreage, and timberland. The price of a sample copy is \$3; annual subscriptions are available for \$28 (first-class mail delivery) or \$16 (standard bulk mail). For further information, contact *Rural Property Bulletin*, P.O. Box 608-SD, Valentine, NE 69201 (telephone: 402/376-2617; e-mail: rural@valentine-ne.com) or visit the *Bulletin's* website (<http://www.cnweb.com/rural>).

Small Farm Today. Established in 1984, this bimonthly "how-to" magazine focuses on alternative and traditional crops, livestock, and direct marketing as well as the promotion of small farming, rural living, sustainability, community, and "agripreneurship." A 1-year subscription costs \$21; single copies are available for \$4.95. For further information, contact *Small Farm Today*, 3903 W. Ridge Trail Rd., Clark, MO 65243-9525 (telephone: 1-800/633-2535; fax: 573/687-3148).

A number of grant, loan, and training programs are available to support small farmers and their communities. Examples of such programs are summarized below. Readers wishing additional information are asked to contact the individuals or offices listed for each item.



GRANTS, LOANS, TRAINING

SARE Program. Grant awards to support profitable, environmentally sound agriculture are available as part of USDA's Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) Program. SARE sponsors farm-based projects, research and education programs, and professional development for extension and related personnel.

Four regional councils (North Central, Northeast, Southern, and Western) administer grant applications and make funding recommendations to USDA's Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service, which supports the program. SARE has funded more than 1,200 projects since its inception in 1988.

North Central SARE. Farmers and ranchers in the North Central Region may apply for grants under the Producer Grant Program, which supports producers who are looking for economically viable, environmentally sound practices and systems that support their families and communities. Projects can focus on research, educational materials, or demonstrations. Proposals are due April 30, 1999.

In mid-July 1999, North Central SARE will call for preproposals for Research and Education Grants of approximately \$20,000—\$100,000. Teams of producers, researchers, edu-



cators, representatives of nonprofit organizations, and other agricultural professionals in the North Central Region are encouraged to apply.

The North Central Region consists of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. For further information, contact the North Central SARE Program, University of Nebraska, IBA Activities Bldg., Lincoln, NE 68583-0840 (telephone: 402/472-7081; fax: 402/472-0280; e-mail: sare003@unlv.unled) or visit the program's website (<http://wwwsare.org/ncrsare>).

Southern SARE. In May 1999, Southern SARE will call for preproposals for Research and Education grants. These projects must address whole systems and include farmers as participants.

Southern SARE also will call for preproposals for Professional Development Program Grants in May 1999. These grants support the training of agricultural information providers in sustainable agriculture techniques and concepts. Nongovernmental organizations, land-grant universities, and other interested parties are eligible to apply. The preproposals will be due at a date to be announced.

The Southern Region consists of Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin

Islands. For further information about research and education projects, contact Jeff Jordan, Southern SARE Program, Georgia Experiment Station, 1109 Experiment Street, Griffin, GA 30223 (telephone: 770/412-4788; fax: 770/412-4789; e-mail: jjordan@gae.griffin.peachnet.edu). For additional information about the Professional Development Program, contact Roger Crickenberger, Southern SARE Program, North Carolina State University, Box 7602, Raleigh, NC 27695 (telephone: 919/515-3252; fax: 919/515-5950; e-mail: roger_crickenberger@ncsu.edu).

Heifer Project International. Sustainable agriculture training and income-producing animals are available to community groups from Heifer Project International (HPI), a nonprofit organization based in Little Rock, Arkansas. Although HPI works predominantly in developing countries, the organization also operates in the United States.

Participating communities are asked to identify their needs in terms of ways to renew soil, raise animals, and grow crops using sustainable agriculture methods. Recipients of gift animals make a commitment to "pass on" the gift by sharing one or more of their gift animal's offspring with other families in need.

For further information, contact Sue Bertrand, USA Director, Heifer Project International, 1015 Louisiana St., P.O. Box 808, Little Rock, AR 72203-0808 (telephone: 1-800/422-0474 or 501/907-2656; fax: 501/376-8906; e-mail: info@heifer.org) or visit HPI's website (<http://www.heifer.org>). ■

the buyer "sees" the transportation cost included in the bill. There are many good options, but you need to decide how you will get your product to the consumer before you commit to any kind of mail order marketing, by Internet or otherwise.

Customer Loyalty: One potential disadvantage of any kind of mail order direct marketing is that you do not get a very good chance to develop a personal relationship with your customers. Customer loyalty—and repeat sales—often grow out of your personal touch.

Think about ways to make your interactions with your customers more personal and long-lasting. Things like a recipe page or a "virtual tour" of your farm linked to your product sales page are examples. Interacting with customers will take time, too.

Product Availability: Getting the right product mix and maintaining availability are important. Internet

clients have many, many choices. If they find your web page "closed" (gone), or find that you cannot supply products advertised on the page (because the page is not current), they may never come back.

If there are considerable periods of time when you have no products available for sale, the Internet may not be a good alternative for you. Alternatively, you might want to think about sharing a site with others so that it can run all year, even when you personally do not have a product for sale.

BASIC DECISIONS

You do not have to jump into Internet marketing "full steam ahead." You can start small and build an Internet website as you gather more information (see box) to find out if this direct marketing approach works for you.

There are three basic areas in which you need to decide just how much time and money you want to invest.

Should I have a complex or simple

site? Your site can be anything ranging from one simple page to several pages linked through a home page. One page is like a flyer that lists your products. Several pages are like a catalog where the home page is the cover and table of contents. Anything between is possible.

The pages themselves may be simple or complex, ranging from a page with mostly text and a few graphics to pages with animation, sound, and even farm tours. The more complex your site is, the more it will cost to establish and maintain it. More complexity also means more of your time and effort.

Do I change my site often or rarely? You can keep your site the same for long periods, change it often, or anything between. For example, you could keep your basic site the same, but add seasonal specials two or three times a year through temporary pages linked to your home page. The more often you change your site, the greater your expenses and the more time you have to spend deciding what you want to show.

Should I interact with my customers through the Internet or not? There is a range of options. At one end of the spectrum, your site is really just an ad. Customers order by phone or fax. At the other end, customers place the order, give you shipping information, and pay—all without ever talking to you in person. Again, the more functions you add to your site, the more it will cost you in time and money.

The costs of creating and maintaining a website vary around the country. Before you begin to design your own site, contact local firms that develop and maintain web pages so that you can match your site to your budget. Simple, inexpensive sites can be just as effective as elaborate sites if they are done well.

WEBSITES OFFER DIRECT MARKETING INFORMATION

A number of organizations have websites with information about direct marketing, including:

■ Farmer's Market Online (<http://www.farmersmarketonline.com/>). Operated by Outrider News Service, this online marketplace provides a space where shoppers from around the world can meet, correspond, and purchase products directly from farmers, ranchers, and artists.

■ Internet Marketing Center (<http://www.marketingtips.com/index.html>). The Center offers online marketing tips and strategies, success stories, a free monthly newsletter, and research resources.

■ Sustainable Farming Connection (<http://www.sunsite.unc.edu/farming/connection/growmark/netmark/netmark.htm>). This site brings information about how to cut costs, grow healthful food, build strong rural communities, and improve the environment. The site also features "Net Marketing: How Farmers Are Using the Internet to Reach and Satisfy Customers."

The U.S. Department of Agriculture does not warrant the usefulness or value of information provided on non-USDA websites.

How Do I Start?

Start with a draft design. You will need a draft version of your site to take to the person who actually creates the electronic page or pages of your site.

If you are good at drawing and writing, you could probably develop a paper version of the web page yourself. Most people will need help. Again, there are some things you need to think about as you draw up your design.

First, your "tag," the first few words on the page, is critical. When people talk about "searching" or "surfing" the net, the tag is what they find. If you are selling organic honey, you want to make sure organic honey appears in the tag. Otherwise, your customers will never find you.

Second, Internet users are often impatient. If your page takes a long time—more than about 15 seconds—to appear on the customer's computer screen, many people are apt to go to the next site. Complicated or long pages usually take longer to appear.

This is one reason why a simple home page with links to other pages showing specific products can be a good idea. The home page will appear rapidly and get the customers' attention, and they can browse the other pages as they find they want.

Third, remember that the Internet is visual. You could have a website with no graphics at all. It would appear quickly and would be inexpensive to develop and maintain. However, most Internet users want to see things of visual interest. So, balance issues such as cost of development and how rapidly the page appears with the need for visual interest.

Once you have a draft design, find someone to develop and manage your site. You will want to work closely with a web page developer to create

TRY THESE ON FOR SITES

You may wish to visit a few of the websites advertising farm products listed below. Consider which designs and product advertisements you respond to and why.

http://www.angelic-organics.com/	Angelic Organics
http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Delphi/4227	Bowdish Market Garden
http://www.cfarm.com/welcome.htm	Cascadian Farm
http://www.creamery.com/	Egg Farm Dairy
http://www.giftfruit.com/	The Indian River Gift Fruit Company
http://www.redapplefarm.com/	The Red Apple Farm
http://www.tjarksfarm.com/	Tjarks Herb Farm

This representative listing of farm-related websites does not constitute an endorsement by USDA. For additional ideas on website design, readers are encouraged to search for other sites on their own. Internet searches can be performed using the names of small farm operations or products as keywords.

the electronic version of your design. Your original ideas may go through many changes as they turn into an electronic website.

A "webmaster" will put your site on the Internet and manage it. Often, this can be the same person or firm who develops your web page. Make sure you hire a competent firm with a good track record. To find a web page developer and webmaster, look under "web page developer" in the yellow pages or contact any Internet service provider.

Security will probably be a big concern for many of your customers if you offer direct Internet purchasing. They will be putting their credit card information into the Internet. Make sure you use a well-tested, reliable system—designed for Internet financial transactions—that prevents fraud, and make sure your website shows that financial information is secure and encrypted.

Also make sure that you learn

about and meet any State regulations or requirements that apply to your business. Most States have regulations about how cooked products are processed, for example.

Internet marketing is another way for you to get your product directly to the consumer. Like all marketing approaches, it will work for some people and not for others. Read "Your Small Farm Neighbors" in this issue of *Small Farm Digest* to see what some farmers have to say about Internet marketing. You also may wish to examine others' websites (see box) for ideas on effective website design. ■

CSREES Small Farm InfoLine

1-800/583-3071

UPCOMING

EVENTS

DATE	EVENT	LOCATION	CONTACT
March 31— May 5	<i>Beginning a Successful Small Farm Operation</i> <i>Part 1/Wednesday night</i>	Frederick, MD	Terry Poole • 301/694-1594 Ext. 3577
April 1—15	<i>On-Farm Demonstration Workshops</i>	Various SC sites	Fred Broughton • 803/536-7134
April 10	<i>Virginia Cut Flower Growers Conference</i>	Petersburg, VA	Andy Hankins • 804/524-5962
April 15 & May 20 & June 17	<i>Sustainable Agriculture Workshops</i>	Frankfort, KY	Marion Simon • 502/227-6437
Apr. 20—21	<i>Whole Farm Planning for New and Experienced Farmers</i>	Daytona, FL	Tim Crocker • 352/392-1869
Apr. 21	<i>Annual Goat Field Day on "Herd Health"</i>	Langston, OK	Terry Gipson • 405/466-3836

The above entries reflect information available as *Small Farm Digest* went to press. For a more extensive list of events, see CSREES' Small Farm website (<http://www.reeusda.gov/smallfarm>). *Small Farm Digest* welcomes information on upcoming events. Please send submissions to Stephanie Olson, Editor, *Small*

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